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TAGS: [KWBG](#) [PGOV](#) [SCUL](#) [KIRF](#) [IS](#)
SUBJECT: PA PLANS REPAIR OF BETHLEHEM'S CHURCH OF THE
NATIVITY; RELIGIOUS LEADERS BATTLE OVER STATUS QUO RIGHTS

Classified By: Consul General Jake Walles, per reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. PA Local Government Minister Ziad al-Bandak and Presidential Advisor Issa Qassisiya told PolOff in multiple July conversations that the PA considers restoration of the Nativity Church basilica roof a "national priority" and will proceed despite objections from the Church's rival religious communities. Qassisiya said the churches cannot agree on a common restoration scheme but will not block PA-sponsored repairs. Heads of the Jerusalem churches told PolOff that they agree repairs are needed, but remain wary that the other communities will take advantage of the restoration to bolster their respective claims in the disputed basilica. End summary.

With Historic Roof in Danger of Collapse,
PA Officials Determined to Start Repairs

¶2. (C) In multiple July conversations, PA Local Government Minister Ziad al-Bandak and Presidential Advisor Issa Qassisiya told PolOff that the PA considers restoration of the deteriorating roof of the Nativity Church basilica a "national priority" and will proceed with the project despite objections from rival religious communities. Qassisiya said a committee led by al-Bandak (the other members are Qassisiya, Bethlehem business leader Zahi Khoury, Bir Zayt University President Nabil Qassis, former PA Foreign Minister Nasser al-Qidwa and Claudette Habash, Catholic academic/community leader) will meet with President Abbas on July 22 to obtain approval.

¶3. (C) Qassisiya said the churches cannot agree on a common restoration scheme, but will not block PA-sponsored repairs on the roof, which he said is at risk of collapse. He said costs could run in the USD tens of millions, but the PA will fund the work with private donations, which he anticipates will be easy to collect for such a high-profile project and will prevent church squabbling over contributions. (Note: The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate claims exclusive ownership of the basilica, while the Armenian Patriarchate and Franciscan Custody (Catholic) assert that the basilica is common property and have blocked previous Greek efforts to unilaterally repair the roof and walls. The Greeks do not accept any other church sharing restoration costs, as this would imply an ownership interest. End note).

No Agreement by Churches, Whose
Rivalries Block Quick Progress

¶4. (C) Greek Orthodox Patriarch Theophilus III told PolOff July 21 that the basilica roof is in "terrible condition" and needs repairs, but he is wary of the Armenians using roof repairs as a pretext to expand their rights. He said the Greek Patriarchate has documents proving sole ownership of the basilica and unilateral repairs during the Ottoman and

British Mandate periods. He said the Patriarchate already has a general repair plan that includes the basilica roof, but he implied he will accept a PA-led restoration of the roof, if it does not disturb the Status Quo.

15. (C) Armenian Archbishop Aris Shirvanyan told PolOff July 19 that the Armenians support a PA-led restoration of the roof, but want to share contributions to the project and help supervise it, because they consider the basilica common property. Franciscan supervisor for Status Quo matters Athanasius Macora told PolOff July 19 that the Franciscans support a PA-led restoration, as long as the PA uses top-quality, European restoration experts, with experience in the Church's historical craftsmanship. He said the Franciscans have documents proving that the roof is common property, but would allow the PA to solicit donor financing if the other communities agree.

Comment

16. (C) The PA considers the Nativity Church the most important cultural and religious site under its administration. If the PA moves forward with its proposal to repair the basilica roof and obtains donor funding, the project will be among the world's most high-profile historical restoration projects and attract considerable international attention. Even if the PA can calm the sometimes violent rivalries between the Church's religious communities, the technical aspects of a restoration are daunting. The deteriorating roof and the techniques originally employed to build it are themselves historical

JERUSALEM 00001327 002 OF 002

treasures. The roof's existent oak and cedar substructure was donated by Edward IV of England in the 15th century (with some Russian-funded refurbishing in the late 19th century), and the thick, sand-casted lead panel roof was made using techniques that no local craftsmen can replicate, likely necessitating the expertise of European consultants to re-build a roof true to its historical construction.
WALLES